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SOME FAMOUS GOLD RUSHES

BY J. M. GUINN.

(Read April 4, 1898.)

Mining rushes are eccentric, erratic and epidemic. They break out in unlikely places when least expected, become contagious, then disappear as suddenly as they came.

In the Klondike excitement the old-time "gold rush" has come again. It is more than a third of a century since we had a genuine epidemic gold rush. The gold fever of early California days was popularly supposed to be one of the lost epidemics. But an old-time rush is on, and symptoms of gold fever are prevalent even among Silver Republicans.

Most of the old-time miners who were wont to rush on the first rumor of a rich strike in some new region have passed over the divide to—"The undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns"—and no prospector either. The few of the old rushers who remain this side of the divide, broken in health or borne down with the infirmities of age are no longer able to rush; but the rumor of a rich strike still stirs the blood in their veins and each pathetically sighs "Oh, if I were only young again, I would go too."

The gold rush came early in the history of California placor mining. Some were fakes, pure and simple, others were the direct causes of opening up extensive gold fields that added immensely to the world's store of the precious metal. It is not of the fakes that I write. The stories of the quests for the "Lost Cabin," the "Cement Lode," the "wagon-tire diggings" and the many other ignes fatui that lured honest miners over mountains and deserts are interesting but do not pertain to the subject of this paper. Klondike is not a fake, not an illusion, but many a rush with as substantial a base as Klondike ended as the Klondike rush will end, in disappointment to the many and fortunes to a very few.

One of the earliest of California mining rushes was the Gold Bluff excitement. On the Northwest Coast of California, near the

month of the Klamath River, precipitous bluffs, 400 feet high, mark the coast line of the ocean. A party of prospectors in the fall of 1850, who had been up in the Del Norte country, were making their way down to the little trading and trapping station of Trinidad to procure provisions. On reaching the Bluffs, thirty miles above Trinidad, they were astonished to find stretching out before them a beach glittering with golden sands. They could not stop to gather gold; they were starving. So, scraping up a few handfuls of the glittering sands they hastened on. In due time they reached San Francisco, where they exhibited their sand, which proved to be nearly half gold. The excitement began. Companies were formed and claims located at long range. One company of nine locators sent an expert to examine their claims. He, by a careful mathematical calculation, ascertained that the claim would yield forty-three million dollars to each partner. As there was 15 miles of gold beach, the amount of gold in the sands was sufficient to demonetize the precious metal. A laudable desire to benefit the human race possessed some of the claim owners. They formed a joint stock company, with shares at \$100 each. This was the first of those joint stock schemes for dividing profits of mining ventures that became so common later on in California, and are today very popular in the Klondike craze—schemes that usually end in dividing the shareholders' money among the projectors of the swindle. Gold Bluff mining stock went off like the proverbial hot cakes, and prospectors went off as rapidly. Within two days after the expert's wonderful story was spread abroad nine ships were fitted out for Gold Bluff. The first to arrive off the Bluffs was the vessel containing a party of the original discoverers. In attempting to land in a boat, the boat was upset in the breakers and five of the six occupants drowned, Bertram, the leader of the party making the discovery, alone escaping. The vessel put back to Trinidad and the gold hunters made their way up the coast to the Bluffs. But alas! for their golden dreams. Where they had hoped to gather gold by the shipload no gold was to be seen. Old ocean had gathered it back to his treasure vaults.

The bubble burst as suddenly as it had expanded. And yet there was gold at Gold Bluffs, and there is gold there yet. If the ocean could be drained or coffer-dammed for two hundred miles along the gold coast of Northern California and Oregon all the wealth of

Klondike would be but the panning out of a prospect hole compared to the richness that lies hidden in the sands off Gold Beach. For years after the bursting of the Gold Bluff bubble, when the tide was low the sands along Gold Beach were mined with profit.

The Kern River excitement in the spring of 1855 surpassed everything that had preceded it. Seven years of mining had skimmed the richness of the placers. The northern and central gold fields of California had been thoroughly prospected. The miners who had been accustomed to the rich strikes of early years could not content themselves with moderate returns. They were ready for a rush. The first discoveries on the Kern River were made in the summer of 1854, but no excitement followed the first reports. But during the fall and winter rumors were set afloat of rich strikes on the headwaters of that stream. The stories grew as they traveled on. One that had a wide circulation and was readily accepted ran about as follows: A Mexican doctor had appeared in Mariposa loaded down with nuggets. He reported that he and four companions had found a region paved with gold. The very hills were yellow with outcroppings. While gloating over such wealth and loading it into sacks the Indians attacked them and killed his four companions. He escaped with one sack of gold. He proposed to organize a company large enough to exterminate the Indians and then bring out the gold on pack mules.

This, as well as other stories, equally as improbable, were spread broadcast throughout the State. Many of the reports of wonderful strikes were purposely magnified by merchants and dealers in miners' supplies who were overstocked with unsalable goods; and by transportation companies with whom business was slack. Their purpose was accomplished and the rush was on. It was the first rush that had profited Los Angeles. It came at an opportune time for the town. It was hard times in the old pueblo; business was dull and money scarce. The Southern Californian of December 24, 1854, says: "The great scarcity of money is seen in the present exorbitant rates of interest which it commands, 8, 10 and even 15 per cent. a month is freely paid, and the supply even at these rates is too meager to meet the demand." Think of it, 180 per cent. a year for the use of money, and the crime of '73 had not then been committed. (Bimetallism was in full force and effect and the dollar of the daddies current coin of the realm.) In January the rush began. It

struck the old pueblo like a cyclone. Every steamer down the coast was loaded to the guards with adventurers for the mines. The sleepy old metropolis of the cow counties found itself suddenly transformed into a bustling mining camp. The Southern Californian of Feb. 8, 1855, thus describes the situation. "The road from our valley is literally thronged with people on their way to the mines. Hundreds of people have been leaving not only the city, but every portion of the county. Every description of vehicle and animal have been brought into requisition to take the exultant seekers after wealth to the goal of their hopes. Immense ten-mule wagons strung out one after another; long trains of pack mules and men mounted and on foot, with picks and shovels; boarding-house keepers with their tents; merchants with their stocks of miners' necessities and gamblers with their "papers" are constantly leaving for the Kern River mines. The wildest stories are afloat. We do not place implicit reliance, however, upon these stories. If the mines turn out ten dollars a day to the man everybody ought to be satisfied. The opening of these mines has been a godsend to all of us, as the business of the entire country was on the point of taking to a tree." As the boom increased our editor grows more jubilant. In his issue of March 7th he throws out these headlines:

"Stop the Press! Glorious News from Kern River! Bring out the Big Gun! There are a thousand gulches rich with gold and room for ten thousand miners. Miners averaging \$50 a day. One man with his own hands took out \$160 in a day. Five men in ten days took out \$4500."

Another stream of miners and adventurers was pouring into the mines by way of the San Joaquin Valley. From Stockton to Kern River, a distance of 300 miles, the road was crowded with men on foot, on stages, on horseback and on every form of conveyance that would take them to the new El Dorado. In four months five or six thousand men had found their way into the Kern River Valley. There was gold there, but not enough to go round. A few struck it rich, the many struck nothing but "hard luck," and the rush out began. Those who had ridden into the valley footed it out and those who footed it in on sole leather footed it out on their natural soles or depended on sackcloth or charity. Seven years have passed since the first discovery of gold in California, and in that time the grand army of gold seekers has swept back and forth from Klamath in the

north to Kern in the south in search for new gold fields to conquer, while detachments from this army have plodded in the snows of British Columbia, have penetrated the jungles of Panama, have sailed down to Peru and climbed the Andes to the head waters of the Amazon—and the survivors of these detachments have rejoined the main army rich in experience but poor in everything else.

After the wild frenzy of Kern River the press of the State congratulated the public with the assurance that the era of wild rushes was past—"what had been lost in money had been gained in experience." As if a prospector ever profited by experinee. Scarcely had the victims of Kern River resumed work in the old creeks and canons they had deserted when a rumor comes, faint at first, but gathering strength at each repetition, that rich diggings have been struck in the far North. This time it is Frazer River. True, Frazer River is in British Columbia, but what of that! There are enough miners in California to seize the country and hold it until the cream of the mines has been skimmed. Rumors of the richness of the mines increased with every arrival of a steamer from the north. Captains, pursers, mates, cooks and waiters confirmed the stories of rich strikes. Doubters asserted that the dust and nuggets exhibited had made the round trip from San Francisco to Victoria and back. But they were silenced by the assurance that the transportation company was preparing to double the number of its vessels. Commodore Wright was too smart to run his steamers on fake reports. And the very thing that should have caused suspicion was used to confirm the truth of the rumors. The doubters doubted no more, but packed their outfits for Frazer River.

California was played out. Where could an honest miner pan out a hundred dollars a day in California? He could do it every day in Frazer—the papers said so. The first notice of the mines was published in March, 1858. The rush began in the latter part of April, and in four months thirty thousand men—one-sixth of the voting population of the State—had rushed to the mines.

The effect of the craze was disastrous to business in California. Farms were abandoned and crops lost for want of hands to harvest them. Rich claims in the old diggings were sold for a trifle of their value. Lots on Montgomery street that ten years later were worth \$1500 a front foot, were sold for \$100. Real estate in the interior towns was sacrificed at 50 to 75 per cent. less than it was worth

before the rush began. But a halt was called in the rush. The returns were not coming in satisfactorily. By the middle of July less than a hundred thousand dollars in dust had reached San Francisco—only \$3 for each man who had gone to the diggings. There was gold there and plenty of it, so those interested in keeping up the excitement said. The Frazer River was high; wait till it subsides. But it did not subside, and it has not subsided since. It is always on a high. If the Frazer did not subside the excitement did, and that suddenly. Those who had money or could borrow enough from their friends got away at once. Those who had none hung around Victoria and New Westminster until they were shipped back at the government's expense.

After Frazer River came Washoe; but that was a silver craze. In its earlier manifestations it was similar to the gold rushes, but it soon degenerated into corners, freeze-outs and stock gambling. The tragic side of Washoe stock gambling has never been portrayed. The ruined lives, the impoverished homes, the heartaches, the wretchedness and the suicides left in the wake of the bonanza kings' march to wealth are subjects upon which no Californian cares to dwell. No disaster that ever struck the State was so prolific of evil as the mania of thirty years ago for gambling in the stocks of the Washoe silver mines—a gambling mania that made the fortunes of the vulgar silver barons and parvenu bonanza kings of San Francisco. The last of the great gold rushes before Klondike began was the "Ho for Idaho" of 1862-'63-'64. This consisted of a series of rushes, first to the northern part of the territory in 1861-'62, when what is now Idaho was part of Washington. The mining district in the north consisted of a number of small camps or basins such as Florence, Oro Fino, Miller's, etc., rich while they lasted, but soon worked out. The principal rush was to Boise Basin in 1864. The Boise mines were what were called "poor man's diggings." There were no big strikes or rich pockets, but instead a considerable extent of gold-bearing territory that paid good wages. Those of the mining population who settled down to business and kept away from gambling dens and whiskey mills usually made a small raise before their claims were worked out. The first discovery of gold in Boise Basin was made by a party under the leadership of "Old Grimes," (not, however, the one whose "coat was buttoned down before.")

Grimes was killed by the Indians. The survivors of the party built a fort and stood a long siege by the redskins before they made their escape. The creek where the first discovery was made was named after Grimes and the camp where the fort was built was called Hog'em, because the first locators tried to "hog" all the claims on the creek; later on it became "Pioneer City," but no old Boise pioneer ever recognized it by that name.